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ABSTRACT

A technique for helping English-as-a-Second-Language students learn to write accurate paraphrases and summaries, free from personal interpretation, is described. Students first read, in pairs, a paragraph that has a main idea and requires some inferential thinking, especially about the tone and/or purpose. After a specific period of time, students put the passage away and answer two multiple-choice comprehension questions, one addressing the main idea and one inferential. Student pairs must decide on their answer choice and justify their response, requiring them to use their own language to talk about the paragraph. Basics of summarizing and paraphrasing are then reviewed briefly. The students, still in pairs, write a brief summary without consulting the original passage. The class then analyzes sample summaries, and compares students' interpretations, making the distinction between accurate summaries and personal interpretation. In an exercise in identifying bias, students are divided into two groups, with each given a different assignment on the same paragraph. Volunteers then share their paragraphs with class members for critiquing and identification of vocabulary and phrases showing bias. (MSE)

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"What do you mean in your OWN words?" The Problem of Paraphrasing

Irma K. Ghosn

I teach a freshman composition class to EFL students, who come to the university with very little English writing experience. One of the objectives of this course, the first actual college English course they take after the remedial courses, is to have students write a short documented paper on a topic of interest to them. The stickiest problem is to get them to write accurate paraphrases and summaries that are true to the original and free from personal interpretation, and then getting them to make an original contribution to the paper.

I have found the following strategy both effective and enjoyable for the students.

Procedure

Reading for main idea and inferences

1. Select a paragraph that has a main idea and that requires some inferential thinking, especially about the author's tone and/or purpose. (See figure 1.) The brief comprehension mastery tests found in many college readers work especially well. Students work in pairs and read the paragraph carefully in order to understand the facts.
2. When you call time, students put the paragraph away and you give them two multiple-choice comprehension questions, one main idea and one inferential question. The pairs decide on their answer choice and must justify their response. This requires students to use their own language to talk about the paragraph. Before they begin the next task, briefly review the basics of summarizing and paraphrasing.

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Writing the Summary

3. Instruct students (still in pairs) to write a brief summary, limited to two-three sentences, without looking at the original passage. (See figure 2, for student samples.) It is advisable to set a time limit of few minutes to keep the class together.

Evaluating the outcomes

4. When time is up, ask for samples. Depending on the complexity of the samples and available time, we usually examine 1 - 3 samples in one session. Have students display the selected summaries on the OHP, or write them on the board. The class will then analyze the results and compare them to the original as they remember it. After a brief discussion, they take out the original and identify any discrepancies. Guide the students to focus on the clarity of main idea and the accuracy of facts in the summaries.

Usually there is much disagreement about what is really important and what can be left out, and it is then useful to have a class discussion to identify the main ideas. For example, in the sample paragraph, is it important to have the year included in the example summary? Some students in my class were of the opinion that dates should be left out when summarizing, but after a discussion, the class agreed that in this case the date was important and should not be excluded. The advantage of having students work on the summary without seeing the original is that they must use their own language and what vocabulary they remember from the original rather than rely heavily on the phrases and structures of the original.

Students are now beginning to develop an understanding of what is meant by their personal contribution, which they fear they are incapable of "because everything has already been said so well... how could I add anything?" This will become clear with the inevitable summaries produced that often reflect extensive personal interpretation, either intentional or as a result of changes in connotation.

Personal Contribution

5. When students examine the original and compare it with the class summaries, analyzing the differences, do not discard the interpretations. Put them on the board. (See figure 3.) Explain that these are their personal interpretations / analyses of the passage, the kind they are expected to engage in when they write their paper. These

are the "so what?" that their instructor will be asking for. Point out to them where the accurate summary ends and their personal contribution begins, and show them how to document the source, and how to transition to their personal interpretation. Practice this with other examples until the majority of the class demonstrates satisfactory understanding of the process. Assign individual work if necessary.

Identifying bias

6. To help students understand the tone of the author and recognize possible biases, divide the class into two groups, each group getting a different assignment based on the same paragraph. (See figure 4.)

7. Volunteers share their paragraphs with the class who critique them, identifying vocabulary and phrases that show bias.

I use the above activity to teach paraphrasing and summarizing before the students begin their actual term paper writing. Students enjoy this activity, which integrates all the four skills, and reinforces the use of a thesaurus. I usually spend two full sessions on it, reinforced with brief 5-10 minutes follow-up activities when students begin their note taking (which is initially done in class). I then follow a step-by-step process of a process of a proposal, preliminary questions, individual and small-group conferencing, in-class note-taking and drafting, and I find that the quality of papers has improved considerably as students now have a clearer understanding of both the process and the methods they need to use, and the skills necessary to accomplish the task. Their papers are beginning to have a personal voice.

FIGURE I:

From:

Bader, Carol H, Harley F. Anton (1994)

Keys to Better College Reading.

Berlin, N.J: Townsend Press, Inc,

One wintry night in 1890, about four hundred Indians set up camp near Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota. When they awoke the next morning, they found themselves surrounded by US soldiers. On the hilltop above were numerous machine guns. When the soldiers ordered the Indians to hand over any weapons they might have, the Indians refused. The soldiers began searching for weapons. Then someone fired a shot. Immediately, the machine guns started blasting-cutting down Indian men, women, and children. Within a short time, all were killed. Several days later, the frozen bodies were tossed into a common grave. Instead of condemning the soldiers, the US Government awarded the troop twenty-six Medals of Honor and labeled the event a "battle". It was the last fought against the American Indian.

FIGURE II:

The soldiers massacred 400 Indians after one shot was fired, and buried them in simple graves. The government rewarded the soldiers with medals and did not condemn them for this inhuman act.

In 1890, after they refused to give up their weapons, 400 Indians, including women and children, were horribly massacred by US soldiers in South Dakota.

Because the US government wanted to destroy the Indians the soldiers killed 400 Indians and threw them in simple graves. The soldiers were given medals for their "battle".

FIGURE III:

... this inhuman act

Because the US government wanted to destroy the Indians..

FIGURE IV:

- a.** You are an editor of "Famous Battles and Honored Soldiers" magazine. You are writing a paragraph about the Wounded Knee events to be included in an article about the famous battles fought against the Indians.
- b.** You are a historian for the "Native American Chronicle". You are writing an article about the confrontations between the US military and the Indians. Write a paragraph about the Wounded Knee events to be included in this article.